**Callum 21 Oct**

**If we could start then with you just very briefly outlining how long you’ve been teaching and your experience of whether you’ve taught either the key stage 1 or 2 tests or both even perhaps as well?**

I’ve been teaching since 2006, so this is my 13th year of which time I’ve spent the vast majority special needs at primary level, with all the social, emotional, mental health difficulties. I teach and have taught for that time year 5, year 6 age children, but quite often they often are working at a key stage 1 level. We still have to access SATS where it’s appropriate so generally most of the children I work with are working below the threshold of a test, but there is a proportion that would the key stage 2 test because we’re within the key stage 2 curriculum even though might not have reached year 5 and 6.

**I see. And so very generally then what’s your general feeling about those tests?**

Broadly speaking I’ve found it quite positive. When I trained it was literacy framework and literacy strategies and then I went onto a primary strategy and they had 15 minutes where you spent on punctuation and grammar at the start and it kind of slowly disappeared. That I think a lot of the structure was lost there wasn’t the emphasis on particularly kind of punctuation and grammar. I think the bringing in of the tests in like 2014 curriculum, it’s just kind of a microscope back on the kind of teaching of those aspects of literacy.

**Okay sure. So the tests as a result of the introduction of the tests you feel that you’ve now got a bit more structured time to spend on grammar and things is that what you’re saying?**

Yeah it basically makes it a priority and absolutely content of the tests within our context as well has helped us in a way structure the progression we actually have in place now and progression of spelling and grammar framework. I’m the mass coordinator and I have like a progression and calculation policy where these thing are build on actually within the school for the first time. We actually have a, these are the punctuation and grammar you should teach in order and sequence that’s actually the most practical. I do think there are some problems with the tests for sure, I mean the emphasis on grammar is perhaps a little unwarranted it feels like at times, but you know. Some of the terminology is perhaps useful, but others not so much.

**Right I see okay that makes sense. And do you feel that tests are needed to do that then because what would happen if the tests were removed would you still get chance to focus on grammar and would you still have it as a priority do you think?**

I don’t think it would be as big a priority. I think we still have to prioritise them because basically the end of key stage goals that you’re working towards require the children to have mastered or reached a reasonable level of spelling punctuation and grammar. I think it just really focuses you on basically these are the things that are most important and it puts weight on particular aspects of them, particularly spelling punctuation and grammar that you need to spend more time on these things, not necessarily because we’re most tested but because they will be checked at the end because the key performance indicators as such.

**Yeah sure I see. And some teachers have suggested that the tests are quite high stakes, they put quite a lot of pressure on children and teachers. Is that something that you found in your experience as well?**

I think coming from a special background we have a slightly different context to this. For us a lot of our children are below the threshold of a test but we still enter them so basically, I could have a child, any child that’s working at key stage 2 level will do the key stage 2 tests. We know they’re not going to achieve the 100-scale score straight from day 1 because we’re quite confident in our teacher assessment. And the number of pupils we have on roll means that league tables we won’t have enough pupils doing them to enter league tables. I don’t think it’s necessarily the test that’s high stake I think it’s what’s done with the data from the test that makes it high stake.

**I see okay.**

So in our particular setting, because we don’t go into league tables and because we’re not worried necessarily about having to achieve that 100 because we know it’s not a plausible roll to start with. And again, Ofsted are quite accommodating, we’re measured on value added, so how much the children improve. So I don’t think it’s necessarily the test. I think the structure and format of the test is quite fair, it’s multiple choice test, [05.07] done work is the children should be able to kind of access the test. Again, we have children with learning needs, short term memory needs, we don’t do any revision for the tests. So 2 weeks before we’ll do a couple of lessons on, there’s the access and the test skills, so it’s test skills, if it’s a multiple-choice question and you’re not sure then you have a best guess, and things like that. But we don’t go back. I think the high stakes comes from professionals rather than from children and sometimes parents as well.

**Yeah sure that makes sense. So there is a sense of accountability there but it’s slightly different given your school. How do your students generally cope with the tests then you’ve mentioned that lots of them have special educational needs that perhaps aren’t working at key stage 2 national level as such? Can your children access those tests and manage them?**

As a school, because all our children are educational health [06.11] we get special resonants for all children so all children work on key stage 2 will get the additional time [06.18] access to a reader so probably the biggest barrier for us, looking at some of the questions the vocabulary and the words in there are [06.26] the children can do the grammar and they can do the punctuation [06.31] the words mean because they’ve got limited expressing vocabularies.

**Oh, I see and by vocabulary do you mean like specific grammatical terminology then?**

It can be sometimes the terminology is a criticism that comes to them is I don’t link it to kind of what I was doing at A Level back in the early 2000s.

**Yeah sure.**

Quite technical vocabulary. We talk about conjunctions, when I was a child and when I was learning it was just a connective it connects 2 things. When I speak to friends, teachers in modern foreign languages they say actually the difficulty in teaching our children modern foreign languages is that other cultures spend a lot of time on grammar and we don’t.

**Definitely.**

And it has an impact on secondary language is that we don’t teach grammar in the same way other countries do.

**Yeah of course.**

Coming back to your original question in terms of can the children access. They can access it if you kind of facilitate it. So in our school we put them in quite small groups, so you’d have 6-8 children and we will put them all in the hall. We keep them round the table so we don’t specially arrange the classroom and we use the supervision as basically meeting the test standard. We do things like basically we place boiled sweets or raisins or something on the table, and that’s stress management so for us the thing we want them to get out of it is actually to be in a challenging situation and get through the end of it.

**Yeah sure.**

So we actually put a lot of the emphasis not so much on the, this is [08.14] that’s essentially testing what we’ve already taught we don’t need to be keep revising [08.21] to get the last couple of extra marks out of them [08.25] We’re going to do something that can feel quite challenging and quite different and this is how we’re going to get through it. In our school as well, our internal assessment, we use optional SATs. So our children would have done a grammar test at the end of every academic year and again that’s not. But by the time the ones that have been with us for a while reach year 6, they’re quite familiar with the format and again we don’t revise [08.52] we just talk about [08.55]. But essentially, it’s just become part of the end of a year and it stops year 6 thinking oh we’re doing something special or different.

**Yeah sure.**

Because it’s what we do every end of year anyway, just a formal assessment.

**Okay I see that makes sense thank you. Just going back to something that you mentioned earlier, you started to touch on it which was about some criticisms of the tests. And I’m picking up that you have perhaps some criticisms around maybe the use of terminology although you talked about foreign language teaching which I think is a really important point. Are there any other general criticisms that you have of the tests or the content of the tests at all?**

Yeah, we’ve kind of had the same format of SATs, whether it’s grammar or [09.46] for as long as I can remember. I think in terms just visually how different it’d look; kind of a way teachers present work and it would be nice if it in a way it’s trust teachers to see the test before the kids.

**Yeah.**

[10.03] so in my school we have a special text, we present [10.07] want children to read. This brings out the letter A and actually the font in the tests does present like As as As, it doesn’t use like that Times New Roman A. But it can be very sterile in terms of presentation and I think, when you look at the reading SATs, they’ve got lovely illustrations, quite colourful, in terms of a reading text [10.35 and I think [10.38] it’s just because it’s a test it doesn’t have to look like a test.

**Yeah sure.**

And again, if you kind of went on a teacher worksheet website like Twinkle or primary resource or anything like that, a lot of effort from teachers goes into presenting resources [10.54] and making them a bit. Again, do we need mark boxes or would a margin be sufficient because the marker would understand how to mark in a margin.

**Yeah sure. They’re a bit kind of mechanical aren’t they the tests in the way that they’re presented.**

Yeah. Things like adding kind of competent marker doesn’t need a box to tick to say marker when basically the margin. I know it’s part of exam technique sometimes so I think there’s 2 marks for 2 bits and I have used [11.25] but I think for questions quite specific it uses a bold writing. I think in terms of some of the grammar we test, I’ve not seen it recently, but some of the early tests it was looking at like articles, like the and a, as an article. The use of that in anyone’s writing and to know that a were an article I can’t think, unless you’re a lecturer of grammar, of any kind of relevant reason I’d need to know it’s an article.

**Right.**

I think some of the content needs to be decided this is in a way can fill children quite superfluous information.

**Yeah of course.**

And I think we’ve kind of got to. If you have a streamlined curriculum you can teach little well or you can teach a lot okay.

**Yeah sure. It’s interesting you say that. That kind of leads on to my next question which was about I suppose the content of the tests, by some it’s seen as quite demanding the amount of grammatical terminology and you touched upon that then in questioning the presence of the word articles for example. Do you think that the way that children are tested about grammar has any impact upon their general literacy development, so their writing ability or their reading ability things like that? Do you see that the tests are having an impact upon those ways at all?**

I think sometimes it can draw away of [13.03] As a teacher and I choose kind of texts based [13.07] we just use We’re Going on a Bear Hunt, it’s really, really good but it doesn’t follow grammatical rules a lot of the time or punctuation rules because it’s already structured a text and actually when you look at children’s literature most texts break at least one rule or a couple of rules. And I think it’s in a way we end up with split between creative children who get in a creative process and they need to go back and do a lot of redrafting so in our school we let the children write on a 1st draft. We’ve gone back to a drafting model where basically the children write and just get ideas. So for instance, the teaching cycle I’ve just taught we spent a lot of time acting out, kind of playing the story, then made [13.53] to what they did so they wrote their experience. Then we came back and we kind of checked it for the punctuation and grammar because I don’t want it to [14.02]

**Yeah sure.**

And I think the balance between composition and technical writing I think is too skewed towards the technical writing at the minute and I don’t think that’s necessary, because of the test but I think the tests are kind of a factor.

**Right I see so the tests have definitely had an influence then upon the feeling that grammatical features and talk about grammar should also be part of the writing process then perhaps, is that fair to say?**

Yeah. The tests and the focus on grammar in the curriculum can have a really influential role on writing and I think that’s just not right. Writing shouldn’t be like that I think.

**Okay.**

The writing process, it should at least be kind of a step onto the writing process at least sometimes. And it’s being able to turn to a child special specialist and go do you know that’s a really bad piece of writing, and not having to put the you need to check it because actually you’ve had a conjunction there.

**Right definitely.**

A subordinator there and actually you could have used a noun there is I think in a way the grammar is always forcing us to put something else in there because you can always have more.

**Yeah exactly. And there’s an argument that writing doesn’t really work like that but real writers don’t focus so much on grammatical terminology and accuracy, creativity is at the forefront of that.**

Yeah in fact the evidence of children’s books is that there’s so many that break rules. We kind of make reference to what we doing but our shared reasons of the story. And starting a sentence with and, is a huge one, but real part of that story keeping kind of the flow.

**Yeah sure okay that’s really interesting. I’m getting some positive feelings about the tests but some criticisms as well which is really nice to hear a nice kind of balance of views. Thinking a little bit more about the content of the tests in terms of the knowledge about grammar that the tests are actually assessing. You’ve mentioned that the tests are definitely assessing children’s knowledge of terminology. Is there anything else about grammar that you feel those tests are actually assessing then apart from terminology?**

I think it does try and test they’re understanding of when to use it [16.23] if you look at papers specific examples it’s not as clear cut as you’d like it to be with children [16.28] then again I have to kind of double think and I’m a teacher. I think sometimes the subtle differences and nearly too subtle.

**Yeah sure that makes sense.**

It does test children’s understanding of how to apply within kind of quite a narrow context because it is independent children writing it’s basically checking their understanding of grammar punctuation within something they can read.

**Yeah sure.**

Because they’re not writing it.

**And that phrase narrow context is quite interesting because in a way the tests are quite decontextualised right.**

Very much yeah.

**Yeah. Is that something. But you talked about Michael Rosen’s writing and thinking about language in context there so is the issue between contextualised and decontextualised grammar something that has come up at all in your teaching practice, or have the tests kind of steered you would you say towards particular way of teaching in terms of grammar being in or out of context?**

I totally ignore the tests so we have a literacy curriculum that basically says I’m teaching this type of fiction or this type of non-fiction and I’ll teach that [17.48] grammar associated with that [17.50] past tense verbs at the stage each child’s at. If it’s for instance a structure we’d look at imperative words.

**Yeah sure.**

So we basically through the, build it up and [18.06] that we do the tests in May because everything, that leaves May, June and July teacher time particularly in key stage 1 where basically got year 1 and year 2 and you do the test in May you’ve lost a good kind of a sixth really of the time you have [18.23] terms of year 1 and 2 the terms of year 2 to get up to speed and you lose your last.

**Yeah sure.**

So it doesn’t push me because I tend to like to teach punctuation in context because it then informs out independent writers who will work. Basically, we’d start with the text, we’d pick it apart, the children could use highlighters to identify the punctuation and focus on a particular kind of grammatical parts of the text. So we’d spend the first day or two just looking at text, we wouldn’t do any recording or any writing we’d basically use highlighters, we’d pick it apart, we’d cut it up. We’d then do the kind of shared practice where we do [19.04] applying those skills, learn those skills, and then at the end of a kind of 2 week-ish block they’d then be expected to try and apply it in their independent writing and that’s where then they can test.

**Okay great.**

I think that’s more grounded in my experience with literacy strategies.

**Yeah sure.**

My experience with newer teachers is I think newer teachers have not had that framework and they’re trained and you can seem a bit more at sea with it, and there’s a lot more confusion about how to structure sequence of lessons to kind of reach [19.39] outcome.

**Yeah that makes a lot of sense. And just a couple of final questions if that’s okay and these are really about the role and the place of standard English in the curriculum more broadly but also in the tests as well. Do you as a teacher or your school have a policy at all for the kind of use or the teaching of standard English in classrooms?**

It’s not specifically referred to in any policies. We report to kind of a [20.12] compare to we’ve made reference to reading and writing but we don’t refer specifically to a standard English. I think as a special school we’re the only one in rural Lincolnshire.

**Right okay.**

So we have a catchment area of about 150 square miles.

**Wow.**

Some of our children travel an hour on any day and some travel an hour from north some travel an hour from south. So actually, just the difference in dialect.

**Yeah sure.**

I’m not from the local area but this week for instance our focus was on the difference between this is our classroom and this is our classroom. They had to pick apart half the class were accents that came from areas whereas the children from the south of the county actually pronounce it as our.

**Right okay so there’s quite a lot of linguistic variation in your class then.**

Yes, there is.

**And the tests again other criticisms of the tests have suggested that they place a real emphasis on the use of standard English and there’s a couple of questions in the tests which talk about the correct and incorrect form of the verb and the standard and non-standard version etc. Are those ever issues that have come up in your teaching either preparing students for the test or just more broadly at all, especially given that you’ve got a lot of students who use regional grammar and non-standard forms of the language?**

It can be. I’m struggling to think of a specific example but there’s some words where it is actually a local word, particularly the past tense words where it’s in certain parts of Lincolnshire it is a word but if they used it in a national test it wouldn’t be accepted.

**Yeah and that’s interesting isn’t it because to those students that’s a perfectly legitimate way of using language.**

Yeah, it’s how the parents speak, grandparents speak and their friends speak and most of the teachers speak.

**Sure.**

So it can have an impact on. I think that was more of an instance when they used to do the SATs with the 2 pieces of writing, because that had more freedom to use their own kind of vocabulary and language.

**And they have less freedom now is that accurate?**

Yeah. And again, within the kind of, it’s not context driven. I’ve had children in the past that have read a sentence and then because they’ve not understood a word of a sentence in the context that it’s used haven’t answered the question. They understand the principle behind the question, for instance add a question mark or add a prefix or something. I think this year’s test had the word ‘social’ in it. Now social’s quite an abstract term to an 11-year-old and 2 most 11-year olds, if you ask them to define social, they might have heard the word ‘antisocial’ and I think the question was antisocial, it was asking them to link anti and social together. But actually, if you consider most children’s vocabulary, what does social mean and I think. And it might have been a higher order question that they pitched towards children working at that level because there is some differentiation in the questions isn’t there.

**Yeah definitely okay.**

But in a special school that can have quite a knock-on effect because they don’t put the questions necessarily for special children in their ascending order. In a special school the way maths quite often works in that structured test would be that you’d have the low threshold stuff and you’d slowly pitch it up and children would naturally reach a point where they start to struggle and kind of feel that they’ve done.

**Yeah, I see.**

The way the grammar tests are structured isn’t necessarily like that. If the 1st question is a bit of a bank or first couple of questions are bankers then all children should be answered. You’ll have a lot of that so you’ll age particularly children with low self-esteem and quite often dyslexia, ADHD and autism, “this is too hard I can’t do it.”

**How do you deal with non-standard language in the classroom then? So if children use non-standard language in their speaking for example do you have any reactions to that or is that just a normal part of everyday life in your school?**

Well a stage is not age of school so basically; we work out where the child is kind of developmentally rather than chronologically. So it very much depends on the child. We’ve got a child working at year 5, 6 it’s that basically you listen to the pointers because [25.21] so you listen to the point and let the point be made. And then oh I just wanted to point out with this but yes, your point was spot on this is the answer.

**Right okay.**

But the development in the lower children actually some of them I’m just glad we’ve got expressive language and one can make a point.

**Yeah sure.**

I’ll take that point in whatever form it is because I don’t want to knock confidence set them back so obviously, I’ll just let them [25.51]

**Yeah okay that makes a lot of sense. Okay great. I’m looking at my list of questions and I think I’ve got to the end now. Was there anything that you wanted to talk about that you haven’t had chance yet to do so at all with regards to the tests. Or anything that you want to revisit or clarify at all?**

I think the thing I’m unsure of the SATs at the moment is kind of understanding the scale score system the kind of setting the goal after everyone’s done the test.

**Okay.**

I think because it makes it very, very hard as a school basically you’re relying on the cohort to be borderline with other cohorts. I suppose my own son’s school at the minute, he was in quite a capable cohort just through sheer luck, it was the same sets of parents, same community. My wife actually volunteers in the group in the next cohort, working at totally different level, just not quite made some of the connections.

**Right.**

I think it’s that by shifting the goalposts it can have a big impact on schools.

**Yeah sure that makes a lot of sense.**

Yeah. And I think it’s the trust around the tests as well. I don’t see why teachers can’t have more input and actually kind of more kind of insight into the test, because we all know what the curriculum is so we know broadly speaking what they’re going to test. And I think it would help teachers. I think in a way attitudes perceptions around the test should be focused on teachers.

**Yeah definitely.**

Rather than kind of pupils. I think if you can relax teachers and basically make teachers feel part of the process and take what feels like quite sometimes punitive performance management measures and then kind of standardise because there’s pressure on headteachers and headteachers have quite a lot of pressure to teach. The teachers have quite a lot of pressure with the children so it’s from the top down.

**Of course, yeah. So a bit more agency for teachers and a bit more of their voice would be useful in this process.**

Yeah. And I’m sure most professions. But treat professionals professionally.

**Yeah sure that makes a lot of sense.**

The final thing I think is probably teacher training as well. I had an education degree, but looking at some of the fast routes into teacher kind of a 1-year postgraduate courses, I think just having a real grounding in actually the kind of bread and butter kind of teaching of English and within Maths actually. I think a lot of people for the first couple of years can often role play at teaching, they do what they think a teacher should do. And again, disassociate it from the children. And again, in our school we’ve worked really hard. I’m sure you kind of like bits of how we’ve kind of personalised for our context.

**Yeah it sounds great.**

And I think with a national test I think it’s communicating in a way schools need to play punctuation spelling grammar their own.

**Yeah definitely.**

There does need to be kind of a framework that people can lift off.

**Of course.**

There needs to be a starting point, particularly if you have a school where, particularly in primary school, we’ve got 8 teachers of which 2 of us have done full degrees in education and kind of teaching and then everything else is at postgraduate. And we’ve had to put a lot of support in just this is how children learn, this is developmentally where you start and where you build up. Having a national curriculum actually has a sequence [29.37] knowledge and then the children will be able to move onto this. I’m aware of 1 school every year the child moves up, the year group then move the child’s assessment up by 1 year.

**Right okay.**

So then you have the kind of poor foundation to build on. I think [29.56]. Having SATs in year 6 is quite [29.58]. I think the key stage 1 tests are even more arbitrary personally I’d do them under year 3, year 4 instead of key stage 1. There’s a kind of a down lock then. You can have 2 years intensive intervention for children are to track. Testing children at 6 years old, if you’ve got an August birthday, you’re going to be 6.

**Yeah definitely.**

It’s quite an arbitrary, oh we’ll just catch you because that’s when we’ve always done it.

**Of course.**

They could nearly have a way of formatting it where children achieve a certain standard and then at the end of that year you try the test.

**Yeah.**

And then within key stage 2 all children should have sat the end of key stage test to see they’ve reached the minimum expected standard.

**Yeah that makes a lot of sense. What sensible ideas. Maybe you should. Yeah sounds like you’d have a good role in policy making, I think.**

Think too much as a.

**No that’s been so interesting chatting to you and thanks so much for sharing you views and giving up your time. And there’s loads there that’s going to be really interesting and useful for what I’m writing, so thanks so much again. And if you’re interested, I can certainly keep you up to date with any publications that will come out of this research.**

Yeah, I followed you on Twitter. I don’t follow a lot of people on Twitter so I’ll just keep you on Twitter and then hopefully it’ll be on there.

**Great. Brilliant. Alright well I’ll let you get back to your half term but thanks so much again for your time and your thoughts.**

Super. I hope that was a help. Thank you very much.

**It was. Thanks a lot. Cheerio. Bye.**